



Sermon Tidbits

AUGUST 1, 2011

Parashat Devarim

Refusal to Listen

I spoke with you and you did not hear (Deuteronomy 1:43) (ואדבר אליכם ולא שמעתם (דברים א:מג)

After wandering in the desert for 40 years following the sin of the spies, the Israelites decided to conquer the Land of Israel. However, Moses warned them that without God's support they were doomed to fail. Yet, they persisted, and as Moses prophesized they suffered a devastating defeat. Describing their refusal to heed his warning, Moses stated, "I spoke to you and you did not hear." In this case though, the word "hear" actually indicates that they did not listen. The Midrash (Lekach Tov) comments that by failing to heed Moses' warning, "They added an intentional [sin] to their [unintentional] sin." Targum Onkelos translates the verse to mean, "And I spoke with you, and you did not accept, and you defied the decree of God." While originally the Israelites had rejected God's promise of the Land out of fear, at this point they were intentionally ignoring a direct warning, preferring to follow their own path instead.

The Children of Israel intentionally refused to listen to Moses' warning and insisted on continuing down their self-destructive path. Today, the Palestinians seem determined to follow a similar course, refusing to hear America's calls to abandon unilateral moves and return to the negotiating table.

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas recently said that the PA leadership had yet to hear direct opposition from the United States on their plans to ask the U.N. to recognize a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 lines, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported. "'We heard about their opposition through mediators,' Abbas told a PLO parley in Ramallah. 'The leadership hasn't received a clear American rejection of the idea to go to the U.N. We don't want a clash with America.'" However, on May 22nd President Barack Obama said that, "no vote at the United Nations will ever create an independent Palestinian state," and later called the Palestinian efforts at the U.N. a "mistake." Moreover, the State Department has maintained that, "We do not believe attempts to resolve final status issues in international bodies like the United Nations are able to bring about the enduring peace...The Israelis and Palestinians must work out the differences between them in direct negotiations." The fact that Abbas feels that he has not heard the U.S. reject his plans for declaring statehood indicates that the Palestinians, much like the Jews in the desert, are intent on ignoring that which they do not want to hear. For more on how direct talks are the key to peace, click [here](#).

The Israelites' refusal to listen to Moses brought them tragic and painful results. As the Palestinians continue to make the same mistake by ignoring America's warnings, the hope of a negotiated settlement is only further delayed. ■

Peace First

And I sent messengers...[with] words of peace (Deut. 2:26) (ואשלח מלאכים...דברי שלום (דברים ב:כו)

In verse 24 of chapter 2, God gives Moses the land of Sichon, telling him, "begin to possess it, and contend with them in battle." Despite this, Moses sends messengers to sue for peace. Why did Moses defy God's command to attack? Malbim (on 2:26) explains that Moses understood that although God had commanded the nation to begin inheriting the land, "he is obligated to first call in peace. And, had they answered in peace, he would not have fought with [Sichon]." Therefore we learn that even in situations where God explicitly commanded the Jewish people to engage another nation in battle, Moses understood that he must attempt a peaceful solution first.

Historically, the Jewish people have always sought peace as the first measure in any difficult situation. This is what Moses did, looking first for peace with Sichon rather than immediately turning to violence. In modern times, the state of Israel lives up to this legacy as she continues to seek peace with her neighbors.

Too often, critics of Israel vilify the Jewish state, portraying Israel as a nation that does not care about peace. In fact, the opposite is true. Even before the founding of the state of Israel, the early Zionists sought peace with their Arab neighbors. It is this same nation that, with the strong support of the United States, has remained committed to that goal throughout its history. Israel has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to make bold, painful concessions such as withdrawing from land and forcibly removing its citizens—in order to reach peace. Israel's commitment to achieving peace has often been acknowledged by American friends of the Jewish state. Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) has said that "Israel has demonstrated time and again that it seeks nothing more than peace with its neighbors." Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) articulated similar sentiments when he said, "...democracy, opportunity, justice, strength, security and self-defense, innovation, peace. These values fasten the unbreakable bond between the United States and the state of Israel."

Like Moses, who first sought peace with Sichon, Israel has always sought peaceful resolutions to conflict. Sadly, despite Israel's efforts, too many of its neighbor's continue to opt for Sichon's choice of aggression and violence over peaceful coexistence. ■

Heeding the Warning (Haftarah)

The vision of Isaiah.. (Isaiah 1:1)

חזון ישעיהו (ישעיהו א:א)

Eliyahu Kitov writes in his Book of Our Heritage (vol III p. 215), "The Shabbat which immediately precedes the Ninth of Av is called Shabbat Chazon, in allusion to the *haftarah* for the week, the first chapter of Isaiah, which begins with the words *Chazon Yeshayahu* (Isaiah's vision)." Lamenting the spiritual degradation that had befallen the Jewish people, Isaiah warns of the possible consequences if the Israelites refuse to change their ways, "Your country [will be] desolate; your cities [will be] burned with fire; your land, strangers [will] devour it in your presence" (Isaiah 1:7). In essence, Shabbat Chazon laments the people's unwillingness to heed the prophets' warnings and prevent the disaster that they refused to acknowledge.

We read Isaiah's words each year to remind us that many of the calamities that the Jewish people have suffered could have been averted. With this in mind, this Ninth of Av we must redouble our efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

[The Associated Press](#) recently reported that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "wants to shed the nation's secrecy and forge ahead openly with developing nuclear weapons." There is no doubt, though, that a nuclear Iran would pose unacceptable threats to the Jewish state—Ahmadinejad repeatedly calls for the annihilation of "the Zionist regime" and denies that the Holocaust actually took place. This rhetoric is widespread throughout Iran's leadership. Even moderate leaders like former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani have emphasized that only one nuclear bomb is needed to obliterate Israel. "If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with [nuclear] weapons...then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything," Rafsanjani said. In his address in May on Holocaust Memorial Day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said that](#), "If someone threatens to destroy us, we should not ignore it or diminish it...We cannot just think that the threats of Holocaust are over. We have new threatening forces today. They call for our destruction." For more on Iran, visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

On the Ninth of Av, as we mourn the destruction of Jewish communities throughout the ages, we cannot forget the importance of heeding warning signs. We must take them seriously, lest, God forbid, we have yet another tragedy for which to mourn. ■